

Wat of the Bow

by Mathurin Kerbusso

Wat was a good and faithful man of Good Count Henry's who had followed him to many a war. Wat's skill with the bow was legend in all the villages round and he was known throughout the shire as Wat of the Bow.

Now it came to pass that Good Count Henry was called to do service with the Black Prince in France and, being a loyal vassal, he called up his levy and sailed across the sea. Wat was happy to take his bow and kit and board ship in the Count's service, as he had done man and boy and his father before him. He kissed his goodwife farewell, bade his sons to tend the fields, and went to join the army.

Many days and many hardships passed, as they will on campaign, and any who have marched will know them and not need the telling and any who have not would not understand if told. Finally the day came when the French were met in battle and many a good man and many a good knight fell that day, I can tell you, never to rise again or return to home and family.

In the thickest of the fray, Good Count Henry led his knights in a charge against the French line. The ground shook from the pounding of the horse's hooves and the screams of dying men and dying horses rent the very air. Henry's charge broke the line but he was separated from the rest and surrounded by the foe. Count Henry lay about him with his sword like a demon, and his destrier struck and bit like the very Devil come to Earth, but 'twas clear to all that soon he must be unhorsed and killed by the mass of soldiery about him.

Now Wat was standing with the others of Henry's archers, holding fast but loosing no shafts lest they chance to harm friend as well as foe. Wat saw the Good Count's plight and with no more thought than that he grabbed a sheaf of shafts, cut the cords with his knife, stuffed them in his boots and belt, and began to walk toward the place where Good Count Henry was fighting for his very life.

Wat walked as fast as any traveler who must cover many miles from dawn to dark. And as he walked, every four steps he loosed a shaft. And for every shaft he loosed a Frenchman fell. Five, ten, twenty Wat slew as he crossed the open field toward Good Count Henry. Some screamed in pain, but most were dead before their knees could loose and fell as silent as the snow.

To see their comrades slain thus was more than the courage of the Frenchmen could bear, and so they fled. But one more brave than the others cut the Good Count's horse from under him before Wat's shaft plucked out his life. Henry fell hard, and the horse upon his leg. It was so that Wat came upon him, five hundred yards from where his walk began.

But all was not yet well. Ten French knights did see the soldiers flee and the Good Count fall, and they thought them "Here's a way to win some good from the day". And so they charged with lances leveled at the fallen Count with one lone bowman standing o'er him.

Ten shafts did Wat have left from his walk, ten French knights began the charge from two hundred yards away. At a hundred yards, five Frenchmen had given up their saddles and their ghosts. At fifty yards but a pair of French knights were still ahorse, but one would never ride farther. Wat calmly put his last shaft through the eyeslot of the last French knight at twenty yards. But to kill the man was not

to kill the horse, nor take the lance from his hand. It passed through Wat and pinned him to the bloody ground even as the knight fell dead from his saddle.

Now Prince Edward had seen Count Henry's predicament and with his own hand picked knights had charged forward to aid or to avenge. All Wat's deeds were done before the Black Prince arrived, but all had been seen by him. Quickly he dismounted and, while his men freed the fallen Count, the Prince came to kneel beside Wat's stricken form.

Wat still breathed, and his eyes still knew his Prince, though his mouth was too filled with blood to hail him and his arms too empty of't to salute him. Good Count Henry came beside the Prince and kneeled as well, and his eyes were filled with tears.

And Edward asked the Count "What is this good yeoman's name?"

"His name is Wat, Your Highness," says Good Count Henry, "Wat of the Bow. And a better man have I none, and neither has all of England!"

"I would stake my soul on that" says the Black Prince, and then he turned again to the dying Wat.

"Good Wat of the Bow, I have seen many brave deeds in my life at war, and not a few of them this very day. But never have I seen better, not of any knight or squire or man of any rank or station."

"Hear this, and all you gathered about as well; this day, on this bloody field of valor, I, Edward, Prince of Wales, do dub you Sir Wat of the Bow. And your arms shall be a lion rampant, drawing a bow, for none but the heart of a lion could do the deeds I have seen today."

And, smiling, Wat did die, a knight in the service of Good Count Henry and of England. And the Black Prince had his body gently carried from the field and buried with honor and the heralds did book his name with the dead of rank. And Good Count Henry granted land to Wat's family and took his sons to squire.

I say it who was there and saw it all. And now all you sons of England lift your cups and drink a draught to Sir Wat of the Bow!